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## Depression a learned experience says US psychology professor

By DENISE BEATTIE

Is there a relationship between depression and learned helplessness? University of Pennsylvania's Dr. Martin Seligman believes there is and discussed its possibilities and implications on

Thursday during a Psychology Colloquium at York.

Based on symptom similarity between induced or learned helplessness and depression, Seligman's studies provide an increased understanding of the factors involved in these two states. These findings further suggest methods of therapeutically working with depression.

Experiments consisted of situations using either depressed or non-depressed subjects and then manipulating their environment so that it was either alterable or unalterable.

Seligman and his colleagues expected that if a non-depressed person was made helpless in an experimental situation (for example, being unable to control an annoying noise), the induced feeling would be similar to that found in a naturally depressed person.

Studies indicated that both induced-helpless people and already depressed people show deficits in certain functions. These include a deficit in tactics to escape from unpleasant circumstances, cognitive skills in problem solving

and the person's own expectancy of his-her problem solving ability.

For example, in one study a group of non-depressed people were exposed to a noise they could not escape or avoid. In a following situation where the noise was avoidable by making a simple motor movement, they did not learn to avoid it. Neither did already depressed people only exposed to the second condition make the small effort to escape the noise.

At variance to the experience with the induced-helpless and naturally depressed people were subjects who could control the noise in the first experiment. When they were not rendered helpless in the first condition they learned to control the second noise easily.

Another interesting finding concerning deficits outlined by Seligman was helpless and depressed people's reactions to their own ability in problem solving. In a problem solving situation, both groups believe a puzzle solvable but believe they are personally unable to find the solution. Generalizing, they do not feel they have the responses necessary to control their world.

However, in a similar situation, non-depressed people and people not helplessly induced saw their inability to solve a problem as evidence of its unsolvability. Both groups (depressed-helpless and non-depressed-non-helpless) showed an increase in passivity, dysphoria and negative cognitive functioning (although the first group took internal responsibility and the second believed success impossible).

Using these findings to discuss therapy for depressed people, Seligman believes that an individual's own method of attributing his-her failure is an important variable.

Seligman states that any therapy altering a person's attribution styles when these are internal and stable will also lessen depression. This could include assertive training, electro-shock treatments, primal therapy or cognitive therapy.

The idea of immunization to depression raised important developmental considerations. Why are some people more prone to depression and also why do two thirds more women suffer from depression than men?

Studies, Seligman said, have shown that when male and female fourth graders are given unsolvable problems their responses are such that in later, solvable problems, the girls become helpless while the boys improve. Further the girls attribute their failure to their own incompetence which is an internal, stable and global method of attribution while the boys blame their conduct and effort during the problems. The boys are using internal, specific and unstable attribution methods.

Seligman states that these failure attributions mirror teacher's attitudes: girls are given ability criticism while boys are criticized in behavior conduct. Later in life women continue to attribute failure to their ability and become depressed.

Other studies, Seligman believes, also indicate that helplessness causes symptoms similar to depression and also leads to depression. People suffering from chronic depression often suffered from helplessness as children and have retained these attribution strategies as adults.

Seligman suggests that children should be taught that their responses and actions breed effects. They should see that there is something enduring about their actions, that their environment is controllable.

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